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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

THEOLOGY OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas
from the Perspective of the Theology of Abraham Kuyper
with Implications for Public Theology and the Indonesian Context

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor of Philosophy aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. V. Subramaniam,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
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door

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OF THE MAJOR WORKS

APP	: <i>The Promise of Politics</i> by Hannah Arendt
AS	: <i>Antirevolutionaire Staatskunde</i> by Abraham Kuyper
BFN	: <i>Between Facts and Norms</i> by Jürgen Habermas
BPF	: <i>Between Past and Future</i> by Hannah Arendt
CG	: <i>Common Grace</i> by Abraham Kuyper
CGCR	: <i>Common Grace in Centennial Reader</i> by Abraham Kuyper
CR	: <i>Crises of the Republic</i> by Hannah Arendt
CRHPS	: <i>Concluding Remarks in Habermas and the Public Sphere</i> by Jürgen Habermas
CSSOCL	: <i>Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberty</i> by Abraham Kuyper
EST	: <i>Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology</i> by Abraham Kuyper
EU	: <i>Essays in Understanding</i> by Hannah Arendt
EV	: <i>Evolution</i> by Abraham Kuyper
FRPS	: <i>Further Reflections of the Public Sphere</i> by Jürgen Habermas
HACCP	: <i>Hannah Arendt on the Concept of Communicative Power</i> by Jürgen Habermas
HC	: <i>The Human Condition</i> by Hannah Arendt
KCA	: <i>Kuyper on Coalitions and Antithesis</i> by Abraham Kuyper
LC	: <i>Lectures on Calvinism</i> by Abraham Kuyper
LKPP	: <i>Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy</i> by Hannah Arendt
LM	: <i>The Life of the Mind</i> by Hannah Arendt
LSA	: <i>Love and Saint Augustine</i> by Hannah Arendt
MCCA	: <i>Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action</i> by Jürgen Habermas
MDT	: <i>Men in Dark Times</i> by Hannah Arendt
MFCDD	: <i>Modernism: A Fata Morgana in the Christian Domain</i> by Abraham Kuyper
MN	: <i>Maranatha</i> by Abraham Kuyper
OC	: <i>On the Church</i> by Abraham Kuyper
OP	: <i>Our Program</i> by Abraham Kuyper
OR	: <i>On Revolution</i> by Hannah Arendt
OT	: <i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> by Hannah Arendt
PCMS	: <i>Political Communication in Media Society</i> by Jürgen Habermas
PDM	: <i>The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity</i> by Jürgen Habermas
PP	: <i>The Problem of Poverty</i> by Abraham Kuyper
PR	: <i>Pro Rege</i> by Abraham Kuyper
PS	: <i>The Public Sphere</i> by Jürgen Habermas
PT	: <i>Postmetaphysical Thinking</i> by Jürgen Habermas
RPS	: <i>Religion in the Public Sphere</i> by Jürgen Habermas
RPSPPS	: <i>Religion in the Public Sphere of Postsecular Society</i> by Jürgen Habermas
SS	: <i>Sphere Sovereignty</i> by Abraham Kuyper
STPS	: <i>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere</i> by Jürgen Habermas
TCA	: <i>The Theory of Communicative Action</i> by Jürgen Habermas
TJ	: <i>Truth and Justification</i> by Jürgen Habermas
TWB	: <i>Thinking without a Banister</i> by Hannah Arendt
UCML	: <i>Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life</i> by Abraham Kuyper
WHS	: <i>The Work of the Holy Spirit</i> by Abraham Kuyper
WW	: <i>Wisdom and Wonder</i> by Abraham Kuyper

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SUMMARY

This dissertation consists of three parts. The first part is on the context of the research. The second part is on the philosophy of the public sphere. The third part is on the theology of the public sphere. We start from the first. There are two contexts for constructing a theology of the public sphere, namely, public theology in general as the theoretical context and Indonesia's public sphere and public theology in particular as the practical context. Public theology is a theology that penetrates the public sphere. Although public theology has departed from a certain religious heritage, it is often pressed and seduced into either translating or compromising its particular voices or messages, due to the multicultural nature of the contemporary public sphere. The tendency to translate and to compromise involves several problems such as the ontological problems of public theology and of pluralism. By translating or compromising its message, public theology might forsake its distinctive contributions and its specific reason for entering the public sphere. By doing this, public theology might also undermine pluralism itself. To settle this quandary, there must be two reinforcements, both in the public sphere itself and in public theology. A theology of the public sphere emerges to provide these reinforcements.

In addition to the theoretical context, Indonesia's public sphere and public theology are the practical context for constructing a theology of the public sphere. Indonesia's political situation in general and the public sphere in particular have been thriving since the 1998 political turmoil with the overturning of the New Order regime of the late President Soeharto (1921-2008), in power 1967-1998. In short, as acknowledged by scholars, Indonesian society has been developing as a democratic and open society under the Presidencies of B.J Habibie (1936-2019; in power 1998-1999) and Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009; in power 1999-2001) who tried to show an appreciation of plurality. There has been a reinforcement of Indonesian democracy since 1998 through certain efforts such as the increasing freedom of the press, the removal of restrictions on the formation of political parties, the systemic empowerment of civil society, and so forth. The strengthening of democracy in general and the public sphere in particular, however, are not without problems. The problem of media conglomerate and the government's pressure on digital freedom threaten Indonesian democracy and the public sphere. These problems become a serious impediment to democratic progress. A theology of the public sphere is called to obviate this impediment.

The new situation of Indonesian democracy has opened up the public sphere in the country so religious citizens have a say, including the Protestant minority. Though Protestants might speak in the public sphere, it does not mean that the country's public sphere is a quite-plural one. Rather,

it is a quasi-plural public sphere, since it is dominated by the religion of the majority, especially the radicals. The theoretical contribution for the establishment of the quite-plural public sphere and the theologico-philosophical justification of Protestant public theology can be done through a theology of the public sphere.

The theology of the public sphere is an interpretation of the philosophy of the public sphere as articulated by American-German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1929-) from the perspective of the principle of sphere sovereignty of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), a Dutch prime minister, theologian, and activist. This interpretation must be started from the explanation of the philosophy of the public sphere, as conceived by Arendt and Habermas. This is the second part. This part is ended by the dialogue between those philosophers especially on the differences on their thinking.

Arendt has two dialectical notions of the public sphere, namely, the dramatic and the discursive settings. By the first, which she explores in depth, the public sphere becomes a space for delivering memorable words and performing great deeds, exhibiting courage as part of the freedom to act and to initiate something new. In this model of the public sphere, what is more important is self-disclosure in front of an audience. In this related sense, the public sphere also becomes the locus for politics and power, which can both be released or happen only in the public sphere. While exploring Arendt's dramatic model of the public sphere, I found her warning against several crises such as the rise of the social, totalitarianism, the loss of spontaneity and world alienation. These crises were happening mainly under the modern condition. By the second, that is, the discursive setting, Arendt has also an underdeveloped notion of the discursive public sphere. Arendt believes that citizens in the *polis* decide public matters through persuasion. Moreover, under the influence of the 1956 Hungarian revolution she develops the discursive model of the public sphere, the principle of councils leading her to have an increased trust in the public's capacity to act. This underdeveloped notion of the discursive model would be well constructed by Habermas.

Habermas develops his notion of the discursive model with his first major book, a historical sketch of the bourgeois public sphere. Though this is part of a unique development in history, Habermas' sketch contains several normative insights which cannot only be taken directly but would also be maintained and developed by Habermas himself in his later works. The principles of inclusivity, equality and freedom equip this kind of public sphere, making it a counterbalance to the state. Moreover, the public use of reason through rational discourses on subjects of common concern will be Habermas' theme throughout his intellectual career. Habermas develops a more mature and systematic notion of the public sphere in his work on law and democracy. Here, the

political public sphere becomes a space for forming public opinion in noncoercive communication. Civil society partially plays an important role in this public sphere, which is actually polycentric. Civil society, as the prominent player, speaks in the public sphere using communicative action with reciprocally raised validity claims contained in speech acts in the context of the lifeworld in order to reach agreement or consensus. Habermas then develops a unique two-track deliberative democracy, namely, the informal and the formal public sphere, especially parliamentary bodies. In the informal public sphere, Habermas invites religious citizens to speak with their own particular language and reasons in postsecular societies. While exploring Habermas' philosophy of the public sphere, I also mention his warning of several crises such as representative publicness, the refeudalization of the public sphere, and the colonization of the lifeworld.

Although there are some similarities between Arendt and Habermas in their philosophies of the public sphere, there are also differences because they philosophize from different contexts, with different creativity and different points of view. I explore these differences at the end of the second part. On the private sphere, Habermas is not only different from Arendt but more importantly he revises Arendt's deficient notion. Arendt's total rejection of the private sphere seems incompatible with modern societies. Habermas, rather, uses it as a place for nurture before entry into the public sphere. While Arendt is less precise in her notion of the private sphere and her notion of civil society is less developed. Habermas develops a more systematic notion of civil society.

Arendt's notion of the common world and Habermas' idea of the lifeworld have the same root in the Husserlian lifeworld. While Habermas maintains its quasi-transcendental character, Arendt makes it immanent by using the merit of *homo faber* to construct the common world. Both the Arendtian common world and the Habermasian lifeworld are the context for communication in the public sphere. While the notion of the common world and the lifeworld come from the same root, political action and communicative action are derived from different roots. While Habermas modifies Weber's theory of action, Arendt takes over the Aristotelian notions of *praxis* and *poiesis*. Though coming from these different roots, Benhabib's study obviously proves Arendt's influence on Habermas. Moreover, in my analysis, there are some similarities of political action and communicative action such as the emphasis on non-egocentric-based interest and the freedom to take initiative.

Following this exploration, I come to the concept of power. Though some elements are deficient, Habermas' criticism and modification of Arendt's notion of power is very important, especially in the context of the construction of a theology of the public sphere. Habermas' notion

of communicative power is a modification of Arendt's notion of power. This modification emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the discursive setting of the public sphere. The discursive setting is different from the dramatic setting. Nevertheless, I propose several ways out of this dilemma using several theoretical schemes. For instance, I use Young's criticism of Habermas to emphasize the significant notion of storytelling in Arendt's dramatic model to provide a context for communicative action. Though these differences can be interwoven, several aspects of their philosophy of the public sphere need another theoretical framework, namely, Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty. I then come to the last part of this research.

The third part starts with a historical and systematic exploration of Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty. Kuyper's articulation of the principle started with his struggle with the liberals, the French revolution, and German state sovereignty. In short, Kuyper struggled with uniformity and people or state sovereignty when they invaded other social spheres. Digging inspiration from Calvin and Groen in particular, Kuyper defended the diversity and sovereignty of social spheres by articulating the principle of sphere sovereignty. The conviction that Christ is king has several implications. Christ delivers sovereignty to various social spheres. The principle of structural pluralism then has its ontological root in Christ's sovereignty. Moreover, Christ's prerogative of bringing uniformity in his second coming generates an eschatological tolerance toward various religious convictions. The principle of confessional pluralism then has its ontological root in Christ's sovereignty. While Kuyper curtails state sovereignty in relation to Christ's authority, he designates the state as the sphere of spheres with a number of functions such as maintaining each social sphere in its own sovereign domain. In the perspective of the principle of sphere sovereignty, the public sphere as conceived of by Arendt and Habermas is a sovereign sphere since it has its own authority and laws of life which are not derived from the state, the market or the church. The interpretative identification of the public sphere as a sovereign sphere opens the opportunity for a broader and deeper interpretation of more elements of the public sphere. This interpretation is called the theology of the public sphere.

The theology of the public sphere is an interpretation of the philosophy of the public sphere according to Arendt and Habermas from the perspective of Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty. This interpretation involves understanding and appreciation, criticism and corrections. This interpretation is followed up by several theological reflections and finishes with several implications for public theology.

From Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty, there are criticisms and corrections to the philosophy of the public sphere. In view of Kuyper's principle, Arendt's notions of the private sphere and civil society are less precise and less well developed. From the same point of view,

Habermas' notions of the private sphere and civil society are less radical and less prominent. The private sphere should flourish in itself before contributing to the public sphere. Civil society should be empowered for various associations and institutions that receive their sovereignty from God, while civil society is vital as the prominent player in the public sphere. The doctrines of the perichoretic relationship of the Triune God, the image of God and common grace can be used to strengthen the private sphere and civil society. The empowerment of civil society by the principle of sphere sovereignty serves the agenda of public theology itself in differentiation from political theology.

Besides criticisms and corrections, there are things to understand and appreciate. Arendt's and Habermas' revitalization of the public sphere would be highly valued if viewed through Kuyper's principle in that they empower a mediating structure which can be used on the one hand to keep the state in its own sovereign sphere, and on the other hand to keep social spheres from invading other spheres. Here, we found a significant contribution to the philosophy of the public sphere as conceived of by Arendt and Habermas. While the principle of sphere sovereignty presupposes the vital importance of the public sphere, Kuyper never articulated a more mature or a more systematic conception of it. I show in this chapter that from the principles of both structural pluralism and confessional pluralism, the public sphere is vital.

Communication in the public sphere can work only through the lifeworld as the context for human discourse. The lifeworld as conceived of by Habermas and as concretized by Arendt in the common world has its ontological root in the common knowledge of the Triune God. The lifeworld provides the possibility for communicative action. According to Kuyper's principle, communicative action can be valued as the specific model of communication not only in the public sphere but among various social spheres. Certainly, if we view it from Kuyper's perspective, the capacity to act, to have political action and communicative action is rooted in the fact of the human being is created as the image of God, and is supported by common grace.

On the concept of power, both Arendt and Kuyper prefer the polycentric notion of power. Arendt's notion of power is backed up by Kuyper's principle of the sovereignty of conscience. More importantly, Habermas' significant modification of Arendt's notion of power serves the agenda of the principle of structural pluralism. Communicative power as conceived of by Arendt, cannot, according to Habermas, be applied to all conditions. The differentiation of the models of power is precisely what Kuyper wants by his principle. Public theology thus is called to exercise communicative power and not to endorse tyrannical regimes or social injustice blindly. Kuyper's partial responsibility for apartheid policy is criticized here. Nevertheless, Kuyper's significant contributions are much appreciated. One of them is his preference for deliberative democracy.

Kuyper's tendency to choose deliberative democracy is not only in accordance with the philosophy of the public sphere as conceived of by both Arendt and, more importantly, by Habermas, but is also backed up by the Calvinist theology of democracy, including a commitment to plurality. Here, Kuyper's commitment to plurality not only respects Arendt and Habermas' commitments, but more significantly gives them radical legitimacy and a theological foundation. This theological back-up for pluralism is important since theological commitment usually becomes a serious challenge to pluralism itself. Here, I recall Guinness' vision of a civil public square/ sphere, which is neither a sacred nor a naked public square. Such a kind of vision is not only applicable to the western and/or American context but also the Indonesian context as well. This vision invites all religious citizens to speak in the public sphere.

This vision is in line with Habermas' positive recognition of the public role of religions in the context of postsecular societies. Habermas' attempt to reopen the public sphere to religious voices is endorsed not only by Kuyperian eschatological tolerance but also by my reconstruction of anthropological tolerance. Anthropological tolerance is constructed on the basis of Kuyper's insights regarding the radical religiosity of human being which he took from Calvin's notion of the sense of deity or the seed of religion. The implications for public theology are clear. Public theology receives an injection of fresh blood from these theoretical schemes. The implications of this theology of the public sphere pose limits not only for public theology in general but for the Indonesian public sphere and public theology in particular. This theology of the public sphere can have implications for facing several problems in the Indonesian public sphere, such as the problems of the media conglomerates, state pressure on digital freedom, and the quasi-plural public sphere. The problems of the media conglomerates and state pressure on digital freedom can be solved theoretically through the empowerment of civil society which gets its theological support from the doctrine of the image of God, the doctrine of common grace and the principle of sphere sovereignty itself. The problem of a quasi-plural public sphere can be theoretically solved through the public role of religion which gets its theological support from anthropological and eschatological tolerance and the philosophy of the postsecular public sphere.

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